

SHORT TALKS TO RELIGIOUS

**DISCOURAGED,
SISTER?**

By ALPHONSUS RYAN, O.F.M.

**ST. ANTHONY GUILD PRESS
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*O Mary conceived
without sin,
Pray for us
who have recourse to thee!*

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DISCOURAGED, SISTER?

OUR IDEALS

WHEN Jesus first calls a soul to follow Him closely, when for the first time that soul becomes aware of a personal, intimate love for Jesus, she sees in the light of that love, sometimes dimly, sometimes clearly, that the whole use self is to make of self is an offering to her Beloved; that the whole purpose of existence is to have something to give to Him; that the whole joy of existence rests on the fact that He, her Lover, asks of her her love and service.

Her life seems clearly mapped out before her: an ever-deepening intimacy with Christ, every action and duty an act of love for Him, every suffering joyfully accepted in union with Him that souls may be saved. Making no account of the odds against her, she plunges into her life of love and sacrifice with all the generosity of which she is capable.

THE YEARS PASS ON

Then, somehow, as the years pass on — she scarcely knows what has happened, but that joyous glow of morning “fades into the light of common day”; and looking back over the years she thinks wistfully of the time when she was so happy and fervent. She knows she meant to do great things for Christ; it seemed to her she had the power to do them; sanctity was within her grasp — and now? “Ah, well, things were too much for me! I was never meant to be a saint. I’m too old now! I’ve let down the Lord too badly. It’s no use making an effort any more. I’ll just try and keep on the track till the end — and I don’t think I’ll even manage to do that. God help me!”

And she sits back — discouraged! And the devil laughs gleefully! He’s delighted! Two thousand mortal sins wouldn’t have done his work so well for him. Just a bit further down the slope and she’ll fall into despair: exactly the thing he’s been working for all the time. And she has played into his hands; yes, with every throw of the dice, straight into his hands! The devil congratu-

lates himself on his cleverness. No need to tempt her to any more sins. Just keep her on the way she's going and she'll slide right down where he wants her.

Simple, isn't it? And are we going to let him laugh at us — souls redeemed by the Blood of Christ, souls infinitely dear to the Sacred Heart of Jesus? Are we going to fall into this most perfectly disguised of all pitfalls without a struggle? In God's name let us take stock of things and see what has brought us to this pass.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED?

Look back over the years to those early days of fervor. What was it that first came to your notice to cool your ardor? Probably, if you are honest, you will admit that you found, in spite of your lofty aspirations, that you had quite a lot of imperfections. You were uncharitable perhaps, inclined to be irritable and impatient; proud, you resented correction; you found constant hard work a trial, and so on.

Of course, you tried, more or less spasmodically, to correct these faults, but prog-

ress seemed so slow, there was so little to be seen for all your efforts, holiness began to seem a kind of mirage which it was hopeless to pursue any longer. Your desire for holiness didn't quite die out, but it got fainter and fainter as the years passed on.

IMPERFECTIONS AND COMPLICATIONS

Then, too, these very imperfections caused complications which weighed you down. Living as you do in the close circle of a religious community, it is inevitable that the imperfections of each member will often get on the nerves of the rest. Little antipathies are formed, little coldnesses which can be agony to a sensitive heart.

The tendency then is to say: "There, they know me now! They see how imperfect I am. I'll never rise above it. I'm the crabbed one, the cross one, and I'll be that way to the end, I suppose. If only I could get out of these circumstances, go among people who don't know me, make a fresh start! But here — what's the use of trying? They're only laughing up their sleeves at the efforts

I'm trying to make." Back she sits — discouraged! And the devil chuckles silently!

SIN

Or it may be that actual serious sin has come into her life. A weakness in her character, perhaps undreamt-of in the world, has been put to the test in the religious life in some unexpected way, and she has fallen. Mortal sin has often a shattering effect on the spiritual outlook of a religious — just because her ideals are so high, just because she has known something of the love and tenderness of Christ Who died for her. She feels there can be no excuse for her; her love of Christ seems almost a mockery.

She looks around at the other religious — good and holy as she thinks them. "If they only knew!" she gasps to herself. It is quite possible that they, too, have quite as low an opinion of themselves as she has of herself, but she cannot imagine anyone sinking so low. She is suffering from something akin to what doctors call "operation shock": a condition sometimes following on a serious operation and affecting the entire nervous

system. She feels she is not able to comply with even the ordinary observances of religious life — all is over. She has betrayed her Love, she is a sinful religious. Would it not be better, therefore, to take off the habit and go back to the world, where at least she would not be acting the hypocrite?

ILL HEALTH

Or perhaps that bitterly hard trial to the soul athirst for holiness has come to her — ill-health. Now, a serious illness, an accident, an operation are trials that can easily be turned to good account spiritually. While we are lying in bed, with just our sufferings to offer up, it is often quite easy to keep united to Christ, to feel that here in earnest is something we can endure for His dear love.

But when convalescence is over, when we are trying to pick up the threads of community life again, struggling against weakness, an impaired nervous system, general depression; when, added to that, we see the other religious up to their eyes in work and our own job not as well done as when we

were in health; when, little by little, a feeling arises around us that we are not "pulling our weight," that we are "being soft with ourselves," shirking the hard things — oh, then we are in grim reality up against the wall beyond which lie dejection and despair.

TEMPTATION TO QUIT

If any or all of these trials have come upon a soul, the overwhelming temptation is often to say: "Let me get out of this — let me start afresh in some new place. I've ruined my chances, my reputation, my ideals here! I'll quit, and start my life all over again, and profit by the mistakes I've made!"

Now listen!

The trouble with you is that you have the wrong approach to the whole thing. You started off wrong from the beginning. You built on pride instead of humility, and now you're discouraged, just because you weren't sincere with God from the very start.

Our Lord Himself in the Gospel many times called souls to high perfection. They may have been wallowing in the mire of sin when He called them. That doesn't matter.

But He insisted, and He emphasized it, that if a person were going to undertake to follow Him closely, that person was to sit down and take into account exactly what was involved — all the pros and cons of the entire matter. "And he who does not carry his cross and follow Me [note the order] cannot be My disciple," said Christ (Luke 14:27). "For . . . what king setting out to engage in battle with another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to meet him who with twenty thousand is coming against him?" (Luke 14:31).

CHRIST KNOWS THE ODDS

You see, Christ knows that when we start off to follow Him, the odds are all against us. We are outnumbered two, three, four to one. We think quite differently; we assume we have no weaknesses, that sanctity is going to be all plain sailing. Then we find the material we have to work with — ourselves — faulty, and we become discouraged. But God knew that that material was faulty, before ever we came to the use of reason.

He saw there was a bias toward sin and imperfection. He isn't half as surprised as we are; in fact, He isn't surprised at all that we have fallen—and consider this: He is omnipotent, He loves us, and He can and will bring good even out of our sins. In some way that we can't see, He will use even our sins to bring us closer to Him if we let Him.

Remember what the humble St. Francis said: "What a man is in God's sight, that he is, and nothing more!" Now in our pursuit of sanctity, we must sit down and evaluate exactly what we have to work with. First of all, let us accept, with a heart full of love, that we have imperfections and that these imperfections may persist till the moment of our death. We will fight against them, yes, so that they may never be a hindrance to Christ's living in us and through us. But if they master us from time to time, we must accept with the utmost humility that we are weak and prone to sin.

We must say: "My God, I know I am a mass of imperfections, and it would only be pride if I worried about them. I accept them, and I will try with Your grace to patch up

the weak places. I will try to put *my self* out of the way in order to let *You* live through me; and when I fail, I will humble myself, knowing that that is what it means to be a member of a fallen race."

I have no right to expect perfection in myself. It would be the utterest pride to grieve over my imperfections as if they were something monstrous. They are perfectly natural and to be expected in every child of Adam, and my job is to patch them up as best I can, relying on God's grace. But to be surprised or discouraged? — nonsense! Similarly, when our imperfections bump into those of another, and misunderstandings arise, treat that person as Christ would treat him; and if the breach is not thereby healed, accept it humbly. That is the cross you are to share with Christ, the cross that He asks you to take up, before you begin to follow Him.

And your sins? Yes, even your sins are no cause for discouragement! "But, I sinned as a religious, I sinned with full knowledge and against the light. Surely Christ must be disappointed in me. Surely He must have

put me aside, must have withdrawn His graces from me!"

WHAT PETER DID

Child, you do not even begin to know the Heart of your Great Lover. Listen to me! Did you ever sin as badly as St. Peter? Think what he did. With the graces of his ordination still fresh upon him — and he was ordained by Christ Himself; between his ordination and his first Mass; within sight of Christ His Master, he three times committed a mortal sin of perjury, calling God to witness that he, Simon Peter, the Rock, who had hailed Jesus as Son of the Living God, had never seen or heard of Him in his life! Yielding to the stress of the powerful emotion of fear, Peter forgot everything else — all was obliterated in the blind panic-born impulse to save himself.

The look that Jesus gave him awakened him to what he had done. He, the first Pope, the one on whom Jesus relied as He relied on no other man; the one who had made special promises of fidelity to Christ, had just offered his Master the greatest

insult it was in his power to offer — he had committed a threefold mortal sin immediately after receiving the Sacred Body and Blood of Christ in mankind's First Holy Communion. "And he went out and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:62).

Now, Peter was not like us; he was a humble man. He saw the full enormity of what he had done. He had lost grace, he had shown himself unworthy of any position of trust, he could never again attribute to himself any virtue; yet there was just one thing that he knew he had, just one thing that he was perfectly certain of though all appearances were against him — and that was, that he still loved Christ his Lord, loved Him supremely, loved Him with every fiber of his being.

Consequently, though he knew his fall, though he must have felt certain he could no longer hope to be the Head of the Apostolic College, he realized that any further defection on his part would hurt his Master still further. Therefore he would remain faithful. "Any position in the kingdom, the lowest of the low, but let me still love You,

let me prove in some way, however inadequate, that I do love You. For I know, I cannot pretend to doubt it, that You, my Christ and my God, love me with an everlasting love I can never hope to repay."

Thus, we may suppose, ran his thoughts. And when, after the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to Peter by the lakeside, how did He treat him? Did He scold him, degrade him from his rank, humiliate him still more for his fall? No. Jesus saw that the only thing that mattered, love, still reigned in Peter's heart — more strongly even than Peter realized. You see, Jesus had known all along that Peter's opinion of himself was too high: "Even though all shall be scandalized because of Thee, I will never be scandalized" (Matt. 26:33). Jesus was not surprised at Peter's fall; He had foreseen it — had actually told him it was going to happen, and in spite of this foreknowledge, had promised Peter the highest honor in His Church.

BUILDING ALL ON LOVE

Now see how Jesus builds all on love. No mention is made of the past. He sees

only the love that lives in Peter's heart. And so He asks him, knowing well the answer: "Simon, son of John, dost thou love Me more than these do?" (John 21:15). More than these? But they had not denied Him, they had not sinned against the light as he had. How could he compare his love with theirs? They were saints, he a sinner. But Jesus was waiting for an answer. Peter was a changed man from the day he had said: "Even though all — yet not I." The evidence was against him, but like the man born blind, he would stick doggedly to the one thing he knew. He would draw no comparisons between himself and others, but with utter humility he would state the simple fact. "Yes, Lord, Thou knowest that I love Thee" (John 21:15).

And did Jesus, as He very well might have done, remark: "Well! a fine way you showed it, Peter!"? No, He knows Peter is speaking the truth. He takes that poor love of his, and builds on it the vast edifice of His Church. He confirms Peter in his office, and says to him in effect: "Well done, Peter! You have kept your love for Me under a

severe test. Well done for not yielding to discouragement. And you are not mistaken, Peter. With the infinite knowledge of My Godhead, I know that you love Me so much that you will one day die for Me, a crucified victim of love! If you had yielded to discouragement, if you had done what Judas did — Peter, the loss to Me, the agony to My Sacred Heart!”

HERE IS THE MODEL

Now you see the model to copy. Take up your cross — your faults, your sins, the complications you have made for yourself, the contempt of others, the contempt of yourself. Take it up, shoulder it. It is with this and this only that you are going to “fill up what is lacking of the sufferings of Christ” (Col. 1:24). Here you have the cross, that very cross you looked forward to at the beginning of your religious life, when you dreamed of suffering in union with your Lover. Here you have it — souls are within your grasp if you embrace it. And yet you sit back, discouraged! The old temptation returns — “Let me out of this!

Other circumstances, other people, other places — but sanctity is impossible here. I will escape this cross. God doesn't mean me to lose my soul in despair."

DOMINE, QUO VADIS?

Let us go back to St. Peter again, and let us see him now an old man, ruling the infant Church at the height of Nero's persecution in Rome. Daily he sees his priests and faithful ones being thrown to the wild beasts, tender virgins and children being crucified in the gardens of the Imperial Palace and used as torches to light up the night at Nero's pleasure-parties. And daily the net grows tighter and tighter round himself. Nero's spies are searching for him. Some day they will find him and torture him and kill him. The subtle temptation must come to him: "This is not God's will for me — to live in this hostile city, where every night threatens to be my last. Let me leave Rome and rule the Church from a place of safety. After all, my life is of value to the Church, for I actually knew the Lord. Certainly He would counsel prudence, He would want my life to be spared."

In spite of this reasoning and the encouraging advice of his friends, from time to time Peter would shake his head as he remembered the day he tried to dissuade his Master from undergoing His Passion. And he could never forget that Christ freely chose to go that Way of the Cross, with all its shame, and disgrace and pain and lonely abandonment.

Nevertheless a venerable legend tells that Peter did eventually yield to the solicitations of his friends. One dark night he left Rome by the Appian Way. Hurrying along, he saw a Figure coming toward him on the road, and as the moonlight fell upon this Presence, he knew Who it was by His way of walking even before he could see His Face. It was His Master, Christ. But when Peter halted, expecting the Lord to greet him, Jesus made as if to walk on, His eyes ever fixed on Rome in the distance. "Lord," whispered Peter, "whither goest Thou?" And Jesus, looking full on Peter with a look that took him back thirty years to the High Priest's courtyard, said: "I am going to Rome, to be crucified for thee!"

Now you see what it all means. You throw your cross aside, you decide to take up an easier life — and off you go! Swing out of the gate, get onto the high road; but as you do, remember this: whether you see Him or not, Christ is coming up that road, maybe in the person of some sufferer more willing than you. He will not stop you, He will not say one word to you. But if you ask Him, "Lord, whither goest Thou?" He will answer you: "I am going to be crucified for thee."

LOVE PROVED BY SUFFERING

You see, it's this way — if you love Christ, you will want to suffer for Him. If you are sincerely in love with Him, you won't mind where the suffering comes from; whether your crosses are self-made or God-given, they are all crosses. Everything should be grist to the mill. Sanctity not for you? — why, your very imperfections, sins, ill-health, unhappy surroundings, are just so many steps toward sanctity if you will but make them so. Throw them all into the Heart of Christ in one great act of love and self-

surrender. For God's sake, forget yourself and your own perfection! Your crucified Lover pleads with you, begs you to love Him, to toil for Him, to wear yourself out to win souls for Him. If you spend your life from this day forward in union with Him, trying in every action to reproduce in yourself the life of Christ, how in the Name of God could you fail to be the saint you hoped to be before you even knew what the cross meant?

Throw every thought of self, and the past, out of your life. Leave room for nothing but Him, work might and main for souls and for His glory. Leave all the rest to Him. Discouragement? — the last and most impenetrable refuge of self-love, an insult, and a heart-wound to Him Who said: "How often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen gathers her young under her wings, but thou wouldst not" (Matt. 23:37). "Her sins, many as they are, shall be forgiven her, because she has loved much" (Luke 7:47).

